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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4880
INFO RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN 7308
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0852
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT 4918
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 3626
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0406
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DEPARTMENT FOR PRM F/O, NEA/ELA, NEA/I

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: DAMASCUS REFUGEE SITREP 2

REF: A. 17 APRIL STATE 40480
[1](#)B. DAMASCUS O/I 21 APRIL

[1](#)1. (SBU) This is the second in a series of Embassy Damascus,s updates on Iraqi refugee processing in Syria.

[1](#)2. (SBU) FACILITIES IMPROVEMENT: Post thanks PRM and DHS/USCIS for authorizing funds to improve the interviewing rooms (ref A). Post's Facilities Manager is coordinating with the contractor and tentatively planning to conduct the work after hours next week. GSO is working with the DHS Team Chief to purchase rugs that should improve acoustics.

[1](#)3. (SBU) SCHEDULE CHANGE: Post is following the implementation of the change in the DHS work week, to begin on Monday, May 5 (ref A). This will give the DHS team a three-day weekend as the preceding work week will conclude on Thursday, May 1. UNHCR and IOM said that the extra long weekend will not reduce the total number of cases this circuit ride will complete. UNHCR was very pleased to hear the change was finalized.

[1](#)4. (SBU) INTERVIEWS: DHS is currently interviewing 16 cases a day. This number will increase to 20 interviews a day on 21 May when the next team arrives. The next team is scheduled to have seven members. IOM said that they have processed over 3000 cases in FY 2008 and are on target to meet the goal of 4000 for Syria.

[1](#)5. (SBU) CIRCUIT RIDER VISAS: Charge lobbied the MFA this week to issue the two pending visas for DHS circuit riders. The MFA was non-committal but implied the applications were still being processed. Additionally, two of the current DHS team members have asked Post to facilitate visa extensions in-country. This would bump up capacity for a few days, although immigration can deny extension requests.

[1](#)6. (SBU) IOM-DHS CHIEFS MEET: On April 23, the DHS team leader paid a courtesy call on the IOM Damascus Chief; Conoff attended. IOM said processing of medicals with the panel physicians was proceeding smoothly and IOM Damascus was using the WRAPS supplemental program from IOM Cairo to track the medicals. IOM Chief also noted that the IOM staff had become more proficient in using WRAPS. IOM also commented that it would like to send more staff for management and additional WRAPS training before the case load increases at the end of May. The meeting went well and the chiefs plan to meet again next week. If IOM Amman and/or Cairo can support, Post will engage IOM Damascus on specifics.

¶7. IRAQI REPATRIATION PUSH: Contacts at the Iraqi Embassy told us they plan to contact IOM to manage their repatriation operation (ref B). However, IOM Damascus chief told Conoff that they have not been approached by the Iraqi Embassy. On a separate but related note, Nadia Jabour, UNHCR Senior Resettlement Officer Damascus, told Post that in meetings last month between Victor Cochetel, UNHCR Director of Resettlement, and the SARG, the SARG repeated assurances that they would not forcibly repatriate any Iraqi refugees.

¶8. (SBU) VISITORS: IOM Regional Representative Shahidul Haque will be in Damascus 28 April) May 1 and will meet with the Charge as well as representatives at UNHCR.
CORBIN